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Nora and the Dog

Nora Astorga seemed perfectly cast as the Mata Hari of the Sandinista revolution, and she played the game of seduction and betrayal with deadly ease. First, she caught the roving eye of General Reynaldo ("the Dog") Pérez Vega, second ranking officer in Nicaragua's notorious National Guard. Then, one night in March 1978, Astorga lured the smitten general to her home. After sending his bodyguard off to buy rum; she drew Pérez into her bedroom and disarmed him. The general undoubtedly thought he was in for a special night; he was. At that moment, five of Astorga's accomplices jumped out of hiding and slit Pérez's throat from ear to ear. Her mission accomplished, Astorga donned guerrilla fatigues and openly joined the revolution. She left behind a brazen message: "I want it to be known that I participated in the operation of bringing to justice the bloody henchman."

That daring crime earned Astorga, 37, a permanent niche in the Sandinista pantheon of heroes. But it has hardly endeared her to Reagan Administration officials, who must decide in the coming weeks whether to accept the onetime terrorist as Nicaragua's new Ambassador to the U.S. At a time when relations between the two countries are close to breaking because of American support for anti-Sandinista *contras*, the nomination of Astorga seemed to take Washington by surprise and struck many as a direct challenge to the White House. Said a U.S. State Department representative: "Nicaragua took a real chance sending us someone so notorious."

Astorga: experienced hostess

Normally the nomination of an ambassador follows a dignified routine designed to attract no attention. Once a name is whispered to American officials, the State Department drafts a biography, evaluates the candidate's credentials and then makes a formal recommendation to the President. If the nominee is acceptable, the U.S. sends an official *agrément* and the appointment is made public. With some exceptions, consent comes without a hitch. But Astorga's nomination was far from typical and had already attracted too much public attention to be reviewed behind closed doors. One Administration spokesman put it mildly: "It's not the usual problem we have. Generally the candidates are too damned dull."

Astorga's remarkable past would be enough to disqualify her in the eyes of many American officials. But what makes her nomination doubly troublesome is that the man she murdered was not just any functionary in the regime of Dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Apparently Pérez was also a valuable CIA "asset." The intelligence community is thought to have raised objections to Astorga's appointment. But a flat refusal has its risks. Some State Department officers argue that the nomination ought to go through rather than give the Sandinistas a chance to retaliate by declaring newly appointed Ambassador to Nicaragua Harry Bergold *persona non grata*.

Astorga is not as odd a choice for ambassador as she might seem. An attorney, she rose rapidly in the Sandinista junta and worked for a time bringing former Somozista National Guardsmen to justice. Since 1983, she has held the post of Deputy Foreign Minister. Her office adjoins that of Foreign Minister Miguel D'Escoto Brockmann, and she is thought to have an insider's view of diplomatic moves in Washington and Managua. But Astorga has one qualification that may outweigh all others. She has proved she is totally dedicated to the Sandinista regime and, as such, is not likely to defect, as two of her five predecessors in Washington have done. In any event, most observers agree Astorga would offer Washington a hostess with unusual experience. As one U.S. diplomat wryly observed, "There's a limit to how close I'd get to her."